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Yugoslavia's Kosovo Problem: A Blight on Pan-Balkanism

One of the Balkans' most pressing nationality conflicts comes from within multiethnic Yugoslavia, where in the southern province of Kosovo tensions are rising between ethnic Slavs—Serbs and Montenegrins—and the majority population of Albanians. These tensions have been aggravated recently by growing protests against discrimination by the minority Slavs and by attempts by the Republic of Serbia to exploit the protests for political gains. Frictions are likely to continue or grow in the coming months, raising the chances for political miscalculations, ethnic Albanian backlash, and communal violence. For the Balkans, this means a more volatile Yugoslavia, tense Yugoslav-Albanian relations, and a worsened atmosphere in which to pursue pan-Balkan cooperation.

The Domestic Political Conflict

A leading source of tension is the political struggle between the Republic of Serbia, one of six highly autonomous republics in Yugoslavia, and the largely ethnic Albanian leadership of Kosovo province. One goal of Serbian officials is to gain increased control over Kosovo, which is an autonomous province of Serbia, and the other such province, Vojvodina. The new, younger and more assertive leadership of Serbia believes that increasing Serbia's control will strengthen its power base and voice in the federation.

The second main goal of Serbian officials is to protect the Serb and Montenegrin minority in Kosovo from perceived persecution by the large and growing ethnic Albanian majority. Many Kosovo Serbs believe they are being deliberately pushed out of the province—which they claim as a historical homeland—by ethnic Albanians. They charge that the Albanians harass them, destroy their property, and discriminate against them in employment.

Most ethnic Albanians in Kosovo, both leaders and the public, probably desire an eventual separation from Serbia and the elevation of Kosovo to full

republic status within Yugoslavia. But, fearing Serb recriminations, for the time being they hope just to maintain the status quo. While Kosovo officials seek to avoid appearing to tolerate or promote Albanian nationalism, they subtly resist Serbian demands and probably discreetly lobby other regions to try to prevent Serbian encroachments on their authority.

Republics generally are wary of Serbia's demands on Kosovo and the threat of Serb nationalism. But they are also concerned about increased tensions in the province—fearing a repeat of the 1981 riots—and are willing to grant Serbia limited increased de facto control over the province. The latest sign of federal support for Serbia came at a national party plenum last June, which granted Serbia broader powers of oversight over the province to protect ethnic Slav rights.

Security Problems

The security scene is most immediately threatened by Kosovo Serbs and Montenegrins who, aided by nationalist-oriented Belgrade intellectuals, have held largely peaceful protest gatherings frequently, on short notice, and in a wide variety of locations in Kosovo and Serbia. The aim of the gatherings is to publicly pressure Kosovo officials, as well as national officials in Belgrade, to help protect their rights. At one recent gathering in Belgrade, some 10,000 Serbs reportedly turned out at a funeral to show sympathy for a Serb soldier slain by an Albanian.

Another potential security threat comes from organized ethnic Albanian nationalist groups, which plan and occasionally carry out violent terrorist-like actions. The Yugoslav press reports periodically on gunrunning activities from Western Europe by Albanian nationalist groups as well as the uncovering of small arms caches by security police.

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Unlike their tolerance of ethnic Serb demonstrators, Kosovo officials have responded to Albanian nationalist gatherings and other activities with massive arrests and other repression. The majority of political prisoners in Yugoslavia are ethnic Albanians, according to most Western sources. Some 1,200 to 3,000 Albanians reportedly have been imprisoned on charges of nationalism since the 1981 riots, with an additional 4,000-6,000 suffering other punishment.

Role of Albania

Yugoslav officials generally believe that Albania aids Albanian nationalists in Kosovo and that—as the only European country not to sign the Helsinki Final Act, which recognizes the frontiers of Europe—it covets ethnic Albanian Yugoslav lands. In our view:

- Albania probably serves as a model of national self-determination for many Yugoslav Albanians.
- It may also inflame ethnic Albanians with its strong public support for Kosovo Albanian rights and demands for greater autonomy. Tirane does not have any imminent hopes or plans of uniting Albanian territories in Yugoslavia with Albania.
- It may also engage in other low-level activities, although we have no solid evidence that Tirane is instigating Albanian separatism in Kosovo by providing arms, funds, or any training.

Outlook

Kosovo almost certainly will remain one of the Balkans' potentially most volatile nationality disputes for at least the next several years, undermining Washington's desire for Yugoslav stability. More Serb demonstrations are likely as are concessions granted to Serbs that could fuel ethnic Albanian resentment and produce a potentially violent Albanian backlash.

The Kosovo problem also will dampen prospects for Balkan stability and cooperation. Yugoslav relations with Albania—already among the most strained in Europe—could face a new chill should major violence recur. A less stable Yugoslavia troubled by bilateral border disputes will be hard-pressed to pursue pan-Balkan cooperation, such as by building on Belgrade's recent proposal for a foreign ministers meeting.

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